Identifying with Asexuality and Belonging to the Ace Spectrum: More than Lacking Sexual
Attraction

A. Catarina Carvalho & David L. Rodrigues

Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, CIS-Iscte, Lisboa, Portugal

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Corresponding Author

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to David L. Rodrigues, Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, CIS-Iscte, Av. das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal. E-mail: dflrs@iscte-iul.pt

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Abstract

Asexuality is typically defined as a lack of sexual attraction, not representing the multitude of experiences in the ace community. To understand the complex ace identity, we explored the correlates cognitions, feelings, and desires of ace individuals. Results of a cross-sectional study ($N = 447$, 61.8% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 24.62$, $SD = 6.98$) showed that endorsing asexuality as a lack of sexual desire was associated with less experience with romantic partners, more experience with intimate affective relationships, more sex averse attitudes, and avoidant attachment. Sexual attraction was associated with more experience with romantic partners, less experience with intimate romantic and affective relationships, and more sex favorable attitudes. Romantic attraction was associated with more experience with romantic partners, less experience with intimate romantic relationships, and anxious attachment. Desire to establish intimate romantic relationships was associated with more experience with romantic partners, more sex favorable attitudes, and anxious attachment. Lastly, desire to establish intimate affective relationships was associated with more experience with affective relationships and anxious attachment. This study highlights the need to acknowledge diversity within the ace community by showing the importance of past experiences and individual differences in shaping the way ace individuals construe their identity and their relationships.

Keywords: Asexuality; Identity; Attraction; Relationships; Attachment

Identifying with Asexuality and Belonging to the Ace Spectrum: More than Lacking Sexual Attraction

Asexuality has gained visibility and recognition from society in the past years through the activism of asexual individuals and the creation of communities. For example, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) was originally created in 2001 and has since then worked to increase awareness and acceptance of asexual individuals. Likewise, asexuality has gained interest from academics and professionals (e.g., Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2021; Flanagan & Peters, 2020, Antonsen et al., 2020; Rothblum et al., 2020; Zheng & Su, 2018; Greaves et al., 2021). And yet, asexuality remains one of the least studied and least understood sexual identities (for a discussion, see Van Houdenhove et al., 2014; Cranney, 2016). Hence, researchers must work to have a more comprehensive understanding of this multifaceted identity and its correlates.

Asexuality Definition

The asexual identity has been explored through a sexual lens, and asexuality is typically defined as the absence of sexual attraction to others (Bogaert, 2006; Brotto et al., 2010). Indeed, researchers often use sexual desire, sexual functioning, or sex disgust premises to approach the asexuality construct and illustrate the experiences of individuals in the ace community (e.g., Bogaert, 2004, 2015; Brotto et al., 2010; Brotto & Yule, 2011, 2017; Yule et al., 2015; Zheng & Su, 2018). This approach assumes that the asexual community is a homogenous group (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015), when in fact individuals within the community have started to use the broader term “ace” to be inclusive of their experiences (Chasin, 2013).

Some researchers already questioned the boundaries of the typical definition of asexuality (Chasin, 2011), and argued that such definition fails to capture the diversity of intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences in the ace spectrum (Cerankowski & Milks,

2010). For example, individuals who identify as graysexual tend to experience low levels of sexual attraction, whereas those who identify as demisexual can experience sexual attraction and have sexual activity when they establish an emotional connection with another person (Carrigan, 2011; Hille et al., 2020). In another example, individuals who identify as aceflux indicate that their sexuality fluctuates within the ace spectrum, and can include occasional periods of demisexuality, sex repulsion, and sexual desire (Glatzer, 2021). However, sexuality is just one dimension of the complex ace identity (Cranney, 2016), with some authors also suggesting the importance of romantic attraction to the ace identity (Brotto et al., 2010; Carrigan, 2011; Scherrer, 2008). Indeed, some ace individuals can have a romantic orientation and desire a romantic intimate partner (e.g., to have a relationship, get married, or have children), whereas others can have an aromantic orientation and desire to establish other intimate relationships to fulfill their emotional needs (e.g., friendships; Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2021; Prause & Graham, 2007; Bulmer & Izuma, 2018). Hence, we argue that a comprehensive understanding of asexuality must consider the multiple experiences of ace individuals, and that the ace identity development can be an interchangeable and dynamic process determined by their experiences and individual differences.

Ace Identity Development

Most existing studies examining shifts in sexual identity tend to exclude ace individuals (e.g., Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). Despite this dearth of research, we can establish some parallels with the process of developing other sexual identities. The development of the ace identity involves the negotiation of sexual assumptions, desires, intimacy expectations, and other normative scripts with oneself and others (Carrigan 2011; Dawson et al., 2019; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019; Scherrer, 2008). Researchers have argued that sexual identity development is a dynamic process that continuously changes throughout development and can be revisited as individuals explore and experience with their sexuality (e.g., Horowitz &

Newcomb, 2002; Rosario et al, 2006). For example, Van de Meerendonk and Probst (2004) found that individuals from sexual minorities experience changes in their sexual identity over time, as a result of an identity formation process that occurs in a *continuum* marked by experimentation.

Only a handful of studies aimed to gain insights on the development of the ace identity, by asking asexual individuals to think about their past and current intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. Among other topics, researchers have focused on how individuals explore their ace identity (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015a), manage their ace identity (MacNeela & Murphy, 2015), and experience their coming out as an ace individual (Robbins et al., 2016). Broadly, these studies have shown that ace individuals question their feelings and relational motives (often distinct from those expressed and enacted by their peers), search for more information about their feelings and motives (e.g., in online groups and communities), go through the process of accepting their identity (sometimes marked by social resistance and denial), and come to terms with their ace identity (e.g., feeling comfortable and disclosing their identity to others). For example, Mitchel and Hunnicutt (2019) found that some ace individuals start by identifying as demisexual before having more knowledge about the ace spectrum and recognizing that asexuality was a better fit to their identity. Individuals in this study described a fluid and nuanced unfolding of the asexual identity, that involved searching online for information, and connecting with communities to discuss the construct of asexuality, attitudes toward sex, attraction desires, and romantic orientations. Likewise, Cranney (2016) found that sexual attraction fluctuated among young adults with an ace identity. Specifically, the author found that most individuals who were not sexually attracted to others experienced changes in sexual attraction later, with only a few individuals maintaining their lack of sexual attraction over time.

These studies defy the assumption that lacking sexual attraction is temporally stable and a shared attribute throughout the ace community (e.g., Bogaert, 2004), and add to the argument that relationships often contribute for individuals to explore and develop their ace identity (Mitchel & Hunnicutt, 2019). However, the way ace individuals construe and experience intimacy and how this connects to their ace identity have remained largely understudied (Scoot & Dawson, 2015). One exception is the relational approach proposed by Dawson and colleagues (2019), which conceptualizes ace identity development as a process that results from social interactions and the negotiation of intimate practices in relationships. Intrinsically related to these negotiations are individual views about sexual activity and past experiences with intimate relationships.

Sexual Behavior and Intimate Relationships

When compared with demisexual or graysexual individuals, those who identify as asexual are more likely to be aromantic, single, and less likely to engage in several sexual behaviors (Hille et al., 2020). The assumption that ace individuals have an overall negative attitude toward sexual behaviors has been supported by research, at least when compared to individuals who are not in the ace spectrum (Bulmer & Izuma, 2018). And yet, research has shown that some ace individuals sometimes engage in solitary sexual activities (e.g., masturbation; Yule et al., 2014; Yule et al., 2017), and demisexual individuals consider having sex with a partner because of the sense of connection associated with the activity (Decker, 2015). Indeed, even though most ace individuals are sex averse and describe themselves as unwilling to have sex or even disgusted by sex (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015a), others are sex neutral or indifferent to sexual activity, and some are sex favorable and even construe sexual activity as a healthy practice (Carrigan, 2011). Hence, this heterogeneity of experiences and motives driving sexual behaviors indicates that the experience of asexual individuals should not serve as a proxy for the ace community (Hille et al., 2020).

Differences in attitudes toward sex are arguably related to the romantic relationship orientation. In their study, Carvalho and Rodrigues (2021) explored intrapersonal and interpersonal differences depending on whether ace individuals experience romantic attraction (i.e., romantic) or not (i.e., aromantic). The authors found that romantic ace individuals indicated less sex aversion, more sexual and romantic experiences and more sexual partners, and a stronger desire to have romantic relationships (either with or without sexual intimacy). Note that having an ace identity does not equate to lacking or avoiding interpersonal intimacy. Indeed, ace individuals often develop meaningful and intimate connections void of romantic feelings (e.g., intimate friendships; Scott & Dawson, 2015, 2016; Mitchel & Hunnicutt, 2019). However, the experiences that ace individuals have during their childhood might also contribute to how they relate to others.

Attachment

The Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1958) postulates that different experiences with significant figures in childhood form relatively stable internal dynamic models (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Research has consistently shown that attachment styles are related to motives, feelings, and behavior in romantic relationships (Shaver et al., 2005). In contrast with securely attached individuals, those with avoidant attachment tend to be emotionally distant from their partners, avoid closeness, and fear intimacy, whereas those with anxious attachment tend to seek care and attention, fear abandonment, and worry about rejection (Brennan et al., 1998; Mikulincer et al., 2003; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Consequently, both avoidant and anxious individuals tend to adopt defensive strategies in their interactions with romantic partners (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Mikulincer et al., 2003).

Research has already established an association between attachment and sexual functioning. For example, individuals with avoidant attachment tend to experience discomfort with sexual activity, abstain from having sex (Kalichman et al., 1994; Tracy et al., 2003), or

engage in sexual activity without experiencing emotional intimacy (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004), whereas individuals with anxious attachment report more sexual desire (Mark et al., 2017) and tend to have sex to reduce insecurity and increase intimacy (Davis et al., 2004; Impett et al., 2008). Aligned with this reasoning, Brotto and colleagues (2010) put forth the idea that asexuality could be explained by an avoidant attachment style, leading individuals to be insecure and having difficulties developing or sustaining romantic relationships. This hypothesis received empirical support in the study by Carvalho and Rodrigues (2021), in which aromantic ace individuals were found to score higher in avoidant attachment in comparison to romantic ace individuals, whereas no differences were observed in anxious attachment scores. Although we must refrain from overgeneralizing these findings to the ace spectrum, an avoidant attachment style might contribute to the development of the ace identity and shape how ace individuals develop and maintain interpersonal relationships.

Current Study and Hypotheses

Our goal with this study was to explore the extent to which past experiences with romantic partners (sexual or ace) and intimate affective non-sexual relationships (romantic or non-romantic), attitudes toward sex (averse, indifferent, or favorable), and attachment styles (avoidance or anxious) had distinct associations with intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences of ace individuals. More specifically, we examined the correlates of the identification with asexuality, current experiences of sexual and romantic attraction, and desire to have romantic and non-romantic intimate relationships in the future. Although quantitative research focused on the ace community is still limited, we advanced some hypotheses based on the available evidence.

Asexuality construct is typically defined as a lack of sexual desire or sexual behavior that is relatively stable over time (Bogaert, 2004, 2013; Chasin, 2013), and measured by the Asexuality Identification Scale (Yule et. al, 2015). However, some authors argue that ace

identity development is a dynamic process shaped by intrapersonal factors and interpersonal experiences and relationships (Dawson et al., 2019; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2019). As such, we expected ace individuals to have a stronger asexuality identification (H1) and to experience less sexual attraction (H2) if they have less experience with romantic partners (H1a), less experience with intimate relationships (H1b), report more sex averse and less sex indifferent or sex favorable attitudes (H1c), and score higher in avoidant attachment (H1d). In contrast, ace individuals should experience more sexual (H2) and romantic attraction (H3) if they have more experience with romantic partners (H2a, H3a) and more experience with intimate relationships (H2b, H3b), report less sex averse and more sex indifferent or sex positive attitudes (H2c, H3c), and score lower in avoidant attachment (H2d, H3d).

We also expected ace individuals to have a stronger desire to have a romantic intimate relationship (H4) if they have more experiences with romantic partners (H4a) and more experience with intimate relationships (H4b), report less sex averse and more sex indifferent or sex positive attitudes (H4c), and score higher in avoidant attachment (H4d). In contrast, ace individuals should have a stronger desire to have a non-romantic intimate relationship (e.g., intimate friendship; H5) if they have less experience with romantic partners (H5a) and less experience with intimate relationships (H5b), report more sex averse and less sex indifferent or sex positive attitudes (H5c), and score lower in avoidant attachment (H5d). Given the lack of studies examining the role of anxious attachment in the experiences of ace individuals, we did not offer *a priori* hypotheses.

Method

Participants

Of the 714 individuals who started the online survey, 256 abandoned before completing the survey and were removed. The final sample included 456 individuals who identify as ace.

Participants were on average 25 years old, mostly cisgender (69.7%), women (61.8%), and indicated an asexual identity (84.0%). Also, most participants lived in the United States of America (54.8%), resided in urban areas (77.2%), were attending college (35.7%) or had a bachelor's degree (28.1%), and were not romantically involved (82.5%). Sample characteristics are detailed in Table 1.

Measures

Identification with the Asexuality Construct

We used the Asexuality Identification Scale (Yule et al., 2015) to assess the identification with the construct of asexuality. This scale uses mostly sex-based items, including sexual attraction (e.g., “I experience sexual attraction towards other people” [reverse-scored]) and lack of interest in sex (e.g., “I would be content if I never had sex again”). Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with 12 items on 7-point scales (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*). Items were mean aggregated ($\alpha = .84$) with higher scores indicating a stronger asexuality identification.

Sexual and romantic attraction

We asked participants to indicate if they experience sexual attraction (“To what extent do you feel sexual attraction for other people, i.e., desire for a sexual relationship or sexual contact with someone?”) and romantic attraction (“To what extent do you feel romantic attraction for other people, i.e., an emotionally intimate connection with someone, not related to sex?”). Responses to each item were given on 7 point-scales (1 = *Not at all* to 7 = *Very much*).

Desire to have intimate relationships

Participants were asked to indicate how willing they were (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*) to have a physically intimate romantic relationship using two items: “To what extent would you like to be in a significant romantic relationship with physical

intimacy, including sex” and “To what extent would you like to be in a significant romantic relationship with physical intimacy, but excluding sex”. Responses were mean aggregated, $r(456) = .25, p < .001$, with higher scores indicating a stronger desire to have intimate romantic relationships. We also asked participants their willingness to have an intimate non-romantic relationship without sex using two items: “To what extent would you like to be in a non-romantic relationship with physical intimacy, excluding sex” and “To what extent would you like to be in a significant non-romantic relationship without physical intimacy (friendship-like)”. Responses were mean aggregated, $r(456) = .30, p < .001$, with higher scores indicating a stronger desire to have intimate affective relationships.

Past romantic partners

Participants were asked to indicate their experience with ace romantic partners (“Have you ever had romantic partners who were asexual?”) and sexual romantic partners (“Have you ever had romantic partners who were not asexual?”). Responses to each item were given on 7 point-scales (1 = *Never* to 7 = *Always*). Items were treated separately in our analyses.

Past intimate relationships

We asked participants to indicate their past experiences with physically intimate non-sexual romantic relationships (“Have you ever had a significant relationship that can be considered romantic, i.e., a close and intimate non-sexual relationship based exclusively on affection [e.g., holding hands, kissing, etc.]?”) and intimate affective relationships (“Have you ever had a significant relationship that can be considered non-romantic, i.e., a close and intimate non-sexual relationship, in which affective gestures (e.g., holding hands, kissing, etc.) were rarely expressed?”). Responses to each item were given on 7 point-scales (1 = *Never* to 7 = *Always*). Items were also treated separately in our analyses.

Attitudes toward sex

Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with three items: “I am repulsed by the idea of having sex (I am sex averse/repulsed)”, “I lack interest in sex, but do not have a problem with the idea of having sex (I am sex indifferent)”, and “Do you consider yourself as sex-favorable? Do you have a favorable attitude toward (personally) engaging in sex, enjoys sex”. Responses to each item were given on 7 point-scales (1 = *Completely Disagree* to 7 = *Completely Agree*). Items were significantly correlated with each other, all $p < .001$, but treated separately in our analyses.

Attachment style

We used the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Simpson et al., 1996) to assess avoidant attachment style (eight items; e.g., “I’m not very comfortable having to depend on other people”) and anxious attachment style (nine items; e.g., “I usually want more closeness and intimacy than others do”). Responses to each item were given on 7 point-scales (1 = *Completely Disagree* to 7 = *Completely Agree*). Items on each subscale were mean aggregated, with higher scores indicating amore avoidant attachment ($\alpha = .79$) and more anxious attachment ($\alpha = .77$).

Procedure

This study followed the guidelines issued by the Ethics Committee at [*blind for review*]. Between July and August 2019, we recruited participants on social networking groups and Reddit discussions boards used by the ace community. Permission to post any study advertisements was requested from administrators or moderators beforehand. Individuals were invited to participate on an anonymous online survey about asexuality and asexual individuals. After accessing the provided weblink, participants were informed about their rights as participants and asked to provide the informed consent before proceeding. The survey started with sociodemographic questions (e.g., age, sex assigned at birth, gender identity; when possible, we used open-ended questions that were later categorized), followed

by the remaining measures. At the end, participants were thanked and debriefed. Data was collected on Qualtrics, and participants took, on average, 16 minutes to complete the survey.

Data Analytic Plan

We first examined the overall pattern of correlations between all variables. For illustrative purposes, we computed pairwise comparisons tests in some variables using *t*-tests or repeated-measures ANOVA with Bonferroni correction. Then, we computed four hierarchical linear regressions to examine the correlates of asexuality identification, sexual attraction, romantic attraction, desire to have intimate romantic relationships, and desire to have intimate affective relationships. To test our hypotheses, all models included as predictor variables past experience with ace romantic partners, past experience with sexual romantic partners, past experiences with physically intimate romantic relationships, past experiences with intimate affective relationships (Step 1), attitudes toward sex (repulse, indifferent, and favorable) (Step 2), and anxious and avoidant attachment scores (Step 3).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Overall descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are presented in Table 2. On average, our participants reported a strong asexuality identification, experienced more romantic (vs. sexual) attraction, $t(454) = 30.32, p < .001, d = 1.66$, reported a stronger desire have intimate affective (vs. romantic) relationships, $t(455) = 8.13, p < .001, d = 0.50$, were more likely to have had sexual (vs. ace) partners, $t(453) = 17.97, p < .001, d = 1.22$, and were more likely to have had intimate romantic (vs. affective) relationships, $t(455) = 2.89, p = .004, d = 0.16$. Results also showed significant differences between attitudes toward sex, $F(2, 453) = 96.87, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.30$, such that ace participants were equally likely to have sex averse or sex indifferent attitudes, $p = 1.00$, and had less sex favorable attitudes, both $p <$

.001. Lastly, ace participants scored higher on avoidant (vs. anxious) attachment, $t(455) = 6.34, p < .001, d = 0.41$.

Main Analyses¹

Asexuality Identification

Results showed that ace individuals with stronger asexuality identification had less experience with ace romantic partners, $p = .034$, less experience with sexual romantic partners, $p = .018$, more experience with intimate affective relationships, $p = .018$, reported more sex averse, $p < .001$, and less sex favorable attitudes, $p < .001$, and scored higher on avoidant attachment, $p = .003$ (see Table 3).

Sexual Attraction

Results showed that ace individuals who experience more sexual attraction had more experience with ace, $p < .001$, and sexual romantic partners, $p < .001$, had less experience with intimate romantic, $p = .039$, and affective relationships, $p = .008$, and reported more sex favorable attitudes, $p < .001$ (see Table 4).

Romantic Attraction

Results showed that ace individuals who experience more romantic attraction had more experience with ace, $p < .001$, and sexual romantic partners, $p < .001$, had less experience with intimate romantic relationships, $p = .030$, scored lower on avoidant attachment, $p < .001$, and scored higher on anxious attachment, $p < .001$ (see Table 4).

Desire for Intimate Romantic Relationships

Results showed that ace individuals with a stronger desire to establish intimate romantic relationships had more experience with ace, $p < .001$, and sexual romantic partners, $p < .001$, reported less sex averse, $p = .049$, and more sex favorable attitudes, $p < .001$, scored

¹ Results from the hierarchical linear regressions were overall consistent after adding covariates to the analyses (i.e., age, country of residence, area of residence, education level, sex assigned at birth, gender identity, sexual identity, and relationship status).

lower on avoidant attachment, $p < .001$, and scored higher on anxious attachment, $p < .001$ (see Table 5).

Desire for Intimate Affective Relationships

Results showed that ace individuals with a stronger desire to establish intimate affective relationships had more experience with affective relationships, $p < .001$, and scored higher on anxious attachment, $p < .001$ (see Table 5).

Discussion

The ace identity must be examined and understood beyond the mere absence of sexual attraction, given that the diversity of feelings and experiences within the ace community is often concealed by this operationalization (Carrigan, 2011). Research on ace identity development is still limited (for exceptions, see MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Robbins et al., 2016; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015a). Based on the available evidence, we argued that affective experiences, interpersonal relationships, sexual experiences, and attachment style may be particularly relevant during this process, as ace individuals need to navigate and negotiate the expectations and demands of others, while striving to achieve the forms of intimacy they desire (Dawson et al., 2016).

Overall, we found mixed support for our hypotheses. As expected, we found that ace individuals with fewer past experiences with ace and sexual romantic partners (H1a) and more negative attitudes toward sex (H1c) endorsed more asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction (i.e., reported a stronger asexuality identification). By identifying as someone who lacks sexual desire, individuals who perceive sex as physically aversive may avoid having romantic partners and romantic relationships (Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2021). In contrast, having more experience with ace and sexual romantic partners (H2a, H3a) and more positive attitudes toward sex (H2c) was associated with the experience of sexual and romantic attraction. Congruently, having more past experiences with ace and sexual romantic partners

(H4a) and having more positive attitudes toward sex (H4c) was also associated with a stronger desire to have physically intimate romantic relationships. These findings clearly show the variability in the experiences of desire and physical intimacy within the ace community (Van Houdenhove et al., 2015a, 2015b). For example, Scherrer (2008) found that ace individuals who were more interested in physical intimacy also experienced romantic attraction. Extending these findings, we showed that sexual and romantic attraction among ace individuals can be facilitated by having more romantic partners in the past (either ace or sexual) and perceiving sexual activity more favorably (i.e., seeing sex as a healthy practice). These findings extend the literature by highlighting that even though some ace individuals construe asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction and tend to behave accordingly in their interpersonal relationships, other ace individuals construe asexuality somewhat differently and acknowledge the presence of sexual and romantic desire and intimacy in their lives. And still, both perspectives over asexuality do not prevent these individuals from identifying as ace and belonging to the same community.

Unexpectedly, *more* experiences in the past with intimate relationships was associated with a stronger asexuality identification (H1b) and desire to have intimate affective relationships (H5b), whereas *fewer* experiences with intimate relationships in the past was associated with experiences of sexual and romantic attraction (H2b, H3b). These results may be explained by the fluidity of the processes underlying the ace identity formation (Mitchel & Hunnicutt, 2019), which are heavily determined by interpersonal experiences. Indeed, Dawson and colleagues (2016) argued that ace individuals may have to engage in different interpersonal experiences to realize their ideal forms of intimacy. Some ace individuals may need to experiment with interpersonal relationships to realize and accept their lack of sexual attraction, whereas others are still exploring their desires but at the same time struggle to form relationships. In this latter case, individuals may be afraid to disclose their questioning

identity to potential partners or feel that surrounding typical intimate relationships, which can prevent them from having relationships.

We also found support for the importance of attachment style to the experiences and desires of ace individuals (see Brotto et al., 2010; Carvalho & Rodrigues, 2021). As expected, having an avoidant attachment was associated with asexuality identification (H1d). Consistently, Carvalho and Rodrigues (2021) found that ace individuals that experienced fewer romantic feelings (i.e., aromantic ace individuals) had a more avoidant attachment and a stronger asexuality identification. Contrary to our expectations, an avoidant attachment was *positively* associated with romantic attraction feelings (H3d) and *negatively* associated with the desire to have an intimate romantic relationship (H4d). Having a romantic relationship may be particularly important for romantic ace individuals. However, having avoidant attachment may create a conflict between asexuality and romantic attraction feelings for these individuals, leading them to fear intimacy, avoid closeness, and keep emotional distance from their partners. Aligned with this reasoning, Carvalho and Rodrigues (2021) found that romantic ace individuals scored higher on avoidant attachment, compared to aromantic ace individuals. Even though we had no prior hypotheses, we also found that anxious attachment was positively associated with romantic attraction feelings and the desire to establish intimate relationships (either romantic or affective). By having an anxious attachment, ace individuals experience more romantic attraction and consider the possibility of having intimate relationships in the future, but at the same time are more afraid of being rejected by their partners.

Limitations and future studies

Even though our study is among the first to explore the correlates of the ace identity and highlight the diverse experiences in the ace community, there are some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, our data was cross-sectional and we must refrain from

establishing causality. This may be particularly relevant in the case of attachment, as we are unable to determine the extent to which attachment styles facilitate or inhibit the establishment and development of intimate relationships. Second, we recruited a diverse and heterogeneous sample from around the world but could not account for possible cultural differences. Third, we were unable to examine differences according to how ace individuals define themselves within the ace spectrum (e.g., compare graysexual with demisexual individuals). Lastly, our participants are well integrated in the ace community and informed about asexuality, and therefore our results are not necessarily generalizable to other individuals who are questioning their identity, lack support from the ace community, or lack knowledge about asexuality.

Furthermore, some of our findings should be taken with caution because we did not assess identity acceptance. Indeed, some of our participants might have their identity fully formed, whereas others might be still exploring their identity. Informed by sexual orientation research (e.g., Mustanski et al., 2014, Rosario et al., 2006), future studies could address the stability of different components of asexuality from a longer life course perspective. For instance, researchers could examine in greater detail different stages of identification with ace identity, how motivations to have (or not) different types of intimate relationships vary according to stage, and the role of individual differences (e.g., attachment style) in these processes. These studies could also take a step further and examine the implications of the ace identity to personal satisfaction and well-being, and how intimate relationships (whether physically intimate or purely affective) helps ace individuals to fulfill their needs of affection. Only then we can have a broader understanding of the complex ace identity.

Conclusion

We explored the correlates of feelings and desires among individuals in the ace community. Our findings support the argument that the ace identity should be seen as a meta-

category that occurs on its own continuum (Chasin, 2011; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015b).

Understanding the diversity of the ace identity will contribute to a better understanding of asexuality not only for academics, but also for health professionals and ace individuals themselves. For example, therapists must acknowledge the diversity within the ace community and understand the different processes that underlie the ace identity formation, to avoid fitting ace individuals into the prototype of asexuality and disregarding their feelings and experiences. In another example, healthcare professionals should also consider that some ace individuals have sex and therefore should discuss sexual health issues in their practice (and with the ace community more broadly). This will allow professionals to provide a better support to ace individuals, attend to their interpersonal relationship needs, and improve their psychological and physical well-being.

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Table 1*Sociodemographic characteristics of ace individuals*

	Ace individuals <i>M (SD) or n (%)</i>
Age	24.81 (7.20)
Sex assigned at birth	
Female	282 (61.8%)
Male	172 (37.7%)
Prefer not to answer	2 (0.4%)
Gender identity	
Cisgender	318 (69.7%)
Non-binary/Genderqueer	39 (8.6%)
Agender	14 (3.1%)
Other (e.g., bigender, questioning transgender)	14 (3.1%)
Prefer not to answer	71 (15.6%)
Sexual identity	
Asexual	383 (84.0%)
Graysexual	35 (7.7%)
Demisexual	23 (5.0%)
Other (e.g., heterosexual, lesbian, gay)	13 (2.93%)
Prefer not to answer	2 (0.4%)
Country of residence	
United States	250 (54.8%)
United Kingdom	41 (9.0%)
Canada	40 (8.8%)
Germany	16 (3.5%)
Australia	16 (3.5%)
Other (e.g., Poland, Portugal)	89 (19.5%)
Prefer not to answer	4 (0.9%)
Residence	
Urban Areas	352 (77.2%)
Rural Areas	103 (22.6%)
Prefer not to answer	1 (0.2%)
Education	
Highschool or less	86 (18.9%)
Attending College	163 (35.7%)
Associate degree	32 (7.0%)
Bachelor's degree	128 (28.1%)
Master's degree	44 (9.6%)
Other (e.g., Doctorate's degree)	3 (0.7%)
Relationship status	
Without a romantic relationship	376 (82.5%)
In a romantic relationship	80 (17.5%)

Table 2*Overall descriptive statistics and correlations*

	<i>M (SD)</i>	Correlations												
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Asexuality identification	5.61 (1.02)	-												
2. Sexual attraction	1.48 (0.71)	-.50***	-											
3. Romantic attraction	4.21 (2.02)	-.19***	.32***	-										
4. Desire intimate romantic relationships	3.50 (1.45)	-.47***	.31***	.63***	-									
5. Desire intimate affective relationships	4.29 (1.67)	.07	-.06	.00	.12**	-								
6. Past ace romantic partners	1.29 (1.09)	-.11*	.12**	.13**	.17***	.05	-							
7. Past sexual romantic partners	3.82 (2.74)	-.17***	.21***	.34***	.29***	.01	-.05	-						
8. Past intimate romantic relationships	3.30 (2.59)	-.13**	.08	.20***	.22***	.06	.25***	.59***	-					
9. Past intimate affective relationships	2.91 (2.31)	.09	-.10*	-.01	.03	.35***	.19***	.16***	.31***	-				
10. Sex averse attitudes	3.88 (2.16)	.63***	-.28***	-.07	-.33***	.03	-.06	-.13**	-.11*	.05	-			
11. Sex indifferent attitudes	3.91 (2.12)	-.44***	.21***	.04	.28***	-.01	.05	.12**	.12**	-.01	-.67***	-		
12. Sex favorable attitudes	2.84 (1.73)	-.65***	.31***	.06	.34**	-.02	.08	.10*	.14**	-.04	-.64***	.58***	-	
13. Avoidant attachment	4.32 (1.17)	.13**	-.07	-.25***	-.20***	-.03	-.05	-.13**	-.16***	-.10*	.03	-.02	-.05	-
14. Anxious attachment	3.85 (1.10)	-.02	.04	.16***	.23***	.18***	-.01	.01	-.05	-.02	.03	-.08	-.03	.04

Table 3*Hierarchical Linear Regressions for Asexuality Identification*

	Asexuality Identification Scale scores		
	Step 1 <i>B (SE)</i>	Step 2 <i>B (SE)</i>	Step 3 <i>B (SE)</i>
Past experiences			
Past ace romantic partners	-0.12** (.05)	-0.07* (.03)	-0.07* (.03)
Past sexual romantic partners	-0.06*** (.02)	-0.04** (.02)	-0.04* (.02)
Past intimate romantic relationships	-0.02 (.02)	0.01 (.02)	0.01 (.02)
Past intimate affective relationships	0.07*** (.02)	0.04* (.02)	0.04* (.02)
Sex attitudes			
Sex averse attitudes		0.19*** (.02)	0.19*** (.02)
Sex indifferent attitudes		0.03 (.02)	0.03 (.02)
Sex positive attitudes		-0.22*** (.03)	-0.21*** (.03)
Attachment style			
Avoidant attachment			0.09** (.03)
Anxious attachment			-0.04 (.03)
Adjusted R^2	.055	.479	.488
ΔF	7.64***	122.60***	4.95**

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficients, SE = standard error. Collinearity statistics, as represented by the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), revealed absence of collinearity between predictors. VIFs ranging from 1.01 to 2.21. * $p \leq .050$. ** $p \leq .010$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Table 4*Hierarchical Linear Regressions for Sexual and Romantic Attraction*

	Sexual attraction			Romantic attraction		
	Step 1 <i>B (SE)</i>	Step 2 <i>B (SE)</i>	Step 3 <i>B (SE)</i>	Step 1 <i>B (SE)</i>	Step 2 <i>B (SE)</i>	Step 3 <i>B (SE)</i>
Past experiences						
Past ace romantic partners	0.12*** (.03)	0.11*** (.03)	0.11*** (.03)	0.33*** (.09)	0.32*** (.09)	0.31*** (.08)
Past sexual romantic partners	0.08*** (.02)	0.07*** (.01)	0.07*** (.01)	0.29*** (.04)	0.29*** (.04)	0.27*** (.04)
Past intimate romantic relationships	-0.02 (.02)	-0.03* (.02)	-0.03* (.02)	-0.04 (.05)	-0.04 (.05)	-0.04 (.05)
Past intimate affective relationships	-0.05*** (.02)	-0.04** (.01)	-0.04** (.01)	-0.08 (.041)	-0.08 (.04)	-0.09* (.04)
Sex attitudes						
Sex averse attitudes		-0.04 (.02)	-0.04 (.02)		-0.02 (.06)	-0.02 (.06)
Sex indifferent attitudes		-0.01 (.02)	-0.00 (.02)		-0.04 (.06)	-0.02 (.06)
Sex positive attitudes		0.09*** (.02)	0.09*** (.02)		0.03 (.07)	0.02 (.07)
Attachment style						
Avoidant attachment			-0.03 (.03)			-0.38*** (.07)
Anxious attachment			0.03 (.03)			0.30*** (.08)
Adjusted R^2	.082	.157	.157	.140	.135	.204
ΔF	11.05***	14.48***	0.95	19.36***	0.23	20.37***

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficients, SE = standard error. Collinearity statistics, as represented by the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), revealed absence of collinearity between predictors. VIFs ranging from 1.01 to 2.21 in both regressions. * $p \leq .050$. ** $p \leq .010$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Table 5*Hierarchical Linear Regressions for Desire for Intimate Relationships*

	Desire to have intimate romantic relationship			Desire to have intimate affective relationships		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Past experiences						
Past ace romantic partners	0.25*** (.06)	0.22*** (.06)	0.21*** (.06)	-0.03 (.07)	-0.03 (.07)	-0.03 (.07)
Past sexual romantic partners	0.16*** (.03)	0.15*** (.03)	0.13*** (.03)	-0.02 (.03)	-0.02 (.04)	-0.03 (.03)
Past intimate romantic relationships	0.01 (.03)	-0.02 (.03)	-0.01 (.03)	-0.02 (.04)	-0.02 (.04)	-0.01 (.04)
Past intimate affective relationships	-0.04 (.03)	-0.02 (.03)	-0.02 (.03)	0.27*** (.03)	0.27*** (.03)	0.27*** (.03)
Sex attitudes						
Sex averse attitudes		-0.09* (.04)	-0.08* (.04)		0.01 (.05)	0.02 (.05)
Sex indifferent attitudes		0.03 (.04)	0.05 (.04)		0.01 (.05)	0.03 (.05)
Sex positive attitudes		0.17*** (.05)	0.16*** (.05)		0.01 (.06)	0.01 (.06)
Attachment style						
Avoidant attachment			-0.19*** (.05)			-0.01 (.06)
Anxious attachment			0.32*** (.05)			0.29*** (.07)
Adjusted R^2	.115	.213	.289	.118	.112	.144
ΔF	15.72***	19.64***	24.94***	16.09***	0.04	9.340***

Note. *B* = unstandardized regression coefficients, *SE* = standard error. Collinearity statistics, as represented by the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), revealed absence of collinearity between predictors. VIFs ranging from 1.01 to 2.21 in both regressions. * $p \leq .050$. ** $p \leq .010$. *** $p \leq .001$.